One Step at a Time

Supports for Independence

Alberta

FAMILY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

91-01375/

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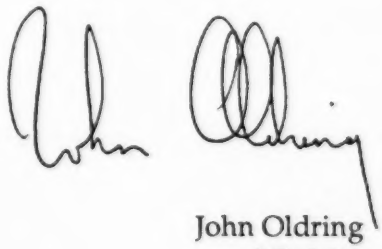
Message from the Minister

In a recent review of the Social Allowance *program, it became apparent that our current system is not meeting the needs of our clients. And, it does not provide the supports needed to encourage independence. It is time to introduce a new income support program which is more responsive to the changing needs of Albertans.*

I am committed to ensuring that Albertans have the tools they need to become independent of government support whenever possible. It is for that reason that I introduced reforms to Alberta's day care system, so that more lower income families can participate in the economic life of our province. And, it is for that same reason that I am very pleased to introduce Supports For Independence, *Alberta's new income support program.*

Supports For Independence *focuses on providing the resources and supports that clients need to work toward gaining greater independence for themselves and their families. These reforms represent a far-reaching change to the way we provide assistance to Albertans. These are not cosmetic changes; they are proactive policies and services designed to increase the opportunity for more families to gain a greater degree of self-sufficiency.*

This is the new direction of social programs in our province. By providing the help Albertans need to get through a difficult time, and the supports they need to help themselves to a better future, Supports For Independence *joins with the other social program reforms to offer stronger support to Albertans in need.*



John Oldring
Minister
Family and Social Services

Dynamics of Change

Income support is provided by the Government of Alberta because no person in our province is expected to live without the basic necessities of life, such as food and shelter.

Until now, that support has been provided through the Social Allowance program, introduced in 1970. Since that time, our province's social and economic environment has changed dramatically and this program no longer accommodates the changing needs of the people we serve.

The Social Allowance program does not always encourage people to leave the program when they are able to work. In fact, there are built-in disincentives which promote dependence on government funding rather than independence based on an ability to work. And, there are inadequate supports available to help clients gain the skills and employment they need to become independent of government support.

The number of people receiving assistance has not decreased dramatically, despite declining unemployment and a strengthened and more diversified provincial economy. To decrease caseloads, and move a larger number of clients toward permanent self-sufficiency, we must take a more proactive approach to helping people help themselves into the workforce.

That is what *Supports For Independence* is all about. Over the next three years, *Supports For Independence* will replace the Social Allowance program. It will provide supports which promote independence — **financial** independence for those who are able to work, and **social** and **personal** independence for those who cannot achieve economic independence on their own.

The changes involve more than just a new name; *Supports For Independence* represents a fundamental shift in government policy, direction and vision. Along with that shift comes a revised benefit structure, a streamlining of program administration, new staff resources, a new delivery model, a new client classification system, and new legislation to be introduced within two years.

The end result will be a system which encourages and supports clients as they strive for the highest possible degree of self-sufficiency. As an introduction to the program, this publication provides an outline of the new direction for income support programs in the province, and the implications for both staff and clients.

Income Support Programs

Supports For Independence has been introduced for a number of reasons, but the primary goal is to provide a better, more effective, income support system than has been possible under the old Social Allowance program. The current context for the new program is presented below in order to clearly outline the reasons behind the reforms.

History

Before 1960, Alberta's welfare system consisted of several separate provincial programs for unemployable people, and municipal programs for people considered employable. By 1960, all of these programs were incorporated under the Public Welfare Act. This provided provincially administered financial assistance to the aged, people with disabilities, and single parents. Municipally administered assistance was provided for "destitute employable persons".

The 1970 Social Development Act integrated all of these programs into one, and provided provincially funded welfare based on meeting **need**, rather than focussing on the circumstances which created the financial need (i.e. disability, single parent, etc.). This Act also introduced rehabilitation services to encourage the re-entry of "employables" into the labour force.

In 1979, the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) program was introduced in order to provide an "assured income" to people with disabilities, and most transferred from Social Allowance to AISH. Unlike Social Allowance, AISH provided a fixed benefit level irrespective of need; and because assets were not taken into account, more people qualified.

During the 1970s, the provincial government gradually assumed responsibility, from the municipalities, for the delivery of assistance to employable persons. By 1990, the program was being delivered by more than 800 provincial government staff in 50 district offices across the province.

There had not been a fundamental review of Alberta's Social Allowance program since the Social Development Act came into effect in 1970. However, in 1988, the release of *Caring and Responsibility: A Social Policy For Alberta* provided an opportunity to review Alberta's social programs to ensure that they strengthen families and support and encourage individual initiative, self-sufficiency and responsibility.

With these basic principles in mind, a comprehensive review of the Social Allowance program was initiated in early 1988 and completed in 1990. The review found that the program has significant problems in structure, delivery and administration, and is unable to accommodate some of the impacts of changes that occurred in Alberta's social and economic environment in the '70s and '80s.

Social and Economic Environment

Some of these key social and economic factors have been identified as follows:

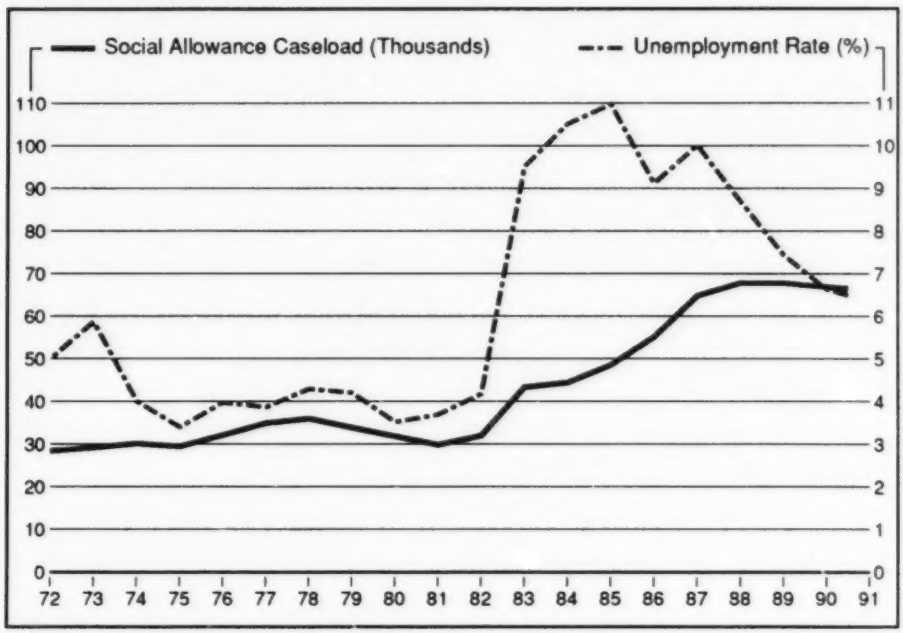
- Changes in family structure, increasing incidence of family breakdown, and more frequent labour force mobility have increased the number of single parents and young single people without a family support network. A sizable number of these turned to Social Allowance for support.
- The economic slowdown of the early 1980s increased the number of unemployed workers who received welfare. Some of them did not make the transition back into the labour market when the economy later strengthened. This may be because there have been considerable changes in the kinds of jobs available and the skills required for many jobs.
- Advanced technology has eliminated many low skill but reasonably well paying jobs. These have been replaced with jobs in the service sector which often offer part time employment, low pay and little security. As a result, more people have come to require Social Allowance to supplement their wages in order to provide for the basic needs of their families.
- Female labour force participation in Alberta has increased from 39 per cent in 1971 to 66 per cent today. In 1971, there was an acceptance of single mothers staying at home to care for their children, with support from Social Allowance if necessary. Since then, societal norms and expectations have shifted and more single parents are working to support their families.
- More and more Albertans with disabilities are moving out of institutions and are living in their communities. They want access to mainstream programs available to all Albertans, and specific support services, as they strive for independence to the fullest extent of their ability.
- Individual rights and freedoms, and equality of access to government programs, became important issues once the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms became law. This placed considerable pressure on the government to ensure equitable and fair treatment of clients under the Social Allowance program.

Social Allowance

When Social Allowance was introduced, most recipients were single parents and others who were not expected to work. In March of 1971, the program served 27,644 cases (households). In September 1990, the program was serving 65,232 cases; 145,900 individual Albertans. Almost half of the people depending on government support are children.

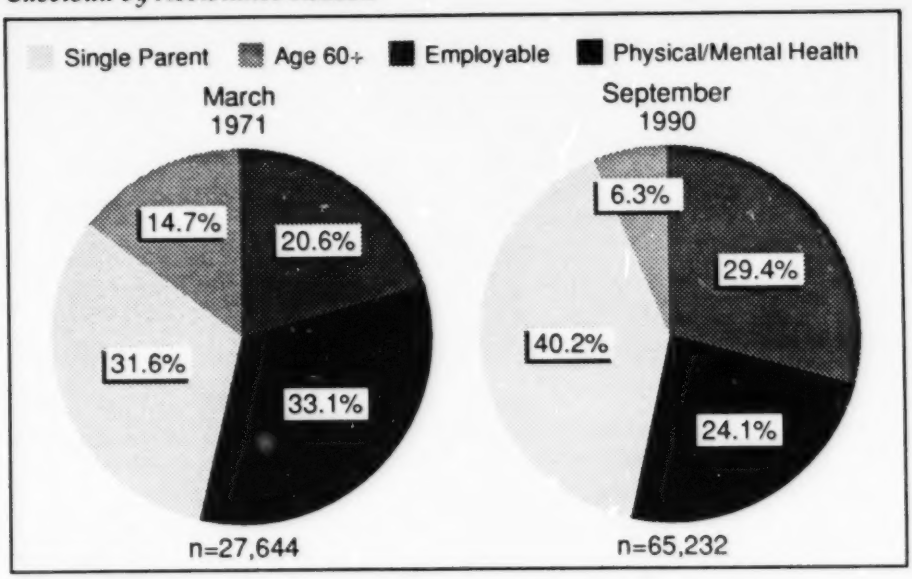
From 1970 to today, caseloads have increased by about 135 per cent despite decreasing unemployment rates of recent years. More than six per cent of Alberta's total population, including 10 per cent of its children, now rely on Social Allowance for all or part of their income in any given month.

Social Allowance Caseload
Annual Average per Fiscal Year (ending March)



Costs have increased along with caseloads. The 1990-91 budget for the Social Allowance program is $678 million, half of which is reimbursed by the federal government under the Canada Assistance Plan. Expenditures have increased by 588 per cent since the 1974/75 fiscal year. Even correcting for inflation, the increase has still been in excess of 250 per cent. In all, Social Allowance expenditures now account for 51 per cent of the Alberta Family and Social Services budget, and 6.2 per cent of the Government of Alberta's total operating expenditures.

Caseload by Assistance Reason



- In 1971, 21 per cent of all clients were considered "employable" and expected to find work. Today, this figure is 54 per cent. This is partly due to changes in the labour market, which brought more single employable persons onto the caseload, and partly because of policy changes made in 1978 which placed a work expectation on some single parents.
- The number of single employable people increased from 5,000 in 1982 to more than 20,000 in 1987. This has decreased to 12,000 at present; about 18 per cent of the total caseload. These clients are predominantly male (68 per cent), young (63 per cent under 30 years of age) and most have not completed high school. These are the lowest cost cases, with an average monthly cost of $432 per case (including medical costs).
- The proportion of the caseload which consists of single parents has remained relatively constant since 1971 (30 to 40 per cent), but the actual numbers have increased substantially. Today, the caseload includes more than 25,000 single parents with 48,900 children, at an average monthly cost of $1,115 per case. Ninety-six per cent of these parents are female, and almost half of them have not completed high school. In 1971, almost all single parents were considered unavailable for employment because of child care responsibilities. Under the Social Allowance program, 57 per cent are considered employable. This is primarily due to policy changes which placed a work expectation on some single parents. Those with only one child are expected to work once the child is more than 4 months old. Those with two children are expected to work if both children are in school. All other single parents have been considered exempt from a work expectation.

- In 1974, 10 per cent of the caseload consisted of families requiring income supplementation. Today, about 14 per cent of Social Allowance cases are families with children headed by a person who is employed full or part time at or near the minimum wage. These families receive income supplementation from the program in order to provide for basic needs.
- New programs for seniors and people with disabilities (AISH, Widows' Pension, Alberta Assured Income Program, and federal income support for seniors) have greatly reduced the number of people in these categories who rely on Social Allowance. Clients have become, on average, younger. In 1980, 39 per cent were less than 30 years old. Today, that figure is 43 per cent.
- The 14,750 single people currently designated as "unemployable" constitute 23 per cent of all current cases. Most have a physical or mental disability; some have multiple barriers to employment such as poor education, no work force experience, and advanced age. Some clients with disabilities are eligible for AISH but receive Social Allowance because they require additional assistance to ensure that their needs are fully covered.

What Needed to Change

The social and economic changes in Alberta since 1970 have greatly increased caseloads and costs, and the Social Allowance program has had significant problems with its ability to respond to this increased pressure. The following issues need to be resolved:

Lack of Employment Focus

In today's society, employment is the only real means of permanent financial self-sufficiency. The Social Allowance program fails to provide a sufficient focus on assisting people to become part of the labour force.

Specifically, there are the following barriers to encouraging employment:

- Leaving the program is perceived by clients as a loss of security and predictability of income.
- The distinction between short and long term employable benefit rates may encourage people to stay on the program rather than risk short term employment followed by lower benefits if they need to return to Social Allowance later.
- Loss of health benefits upon leaving the program may result in fear that medical costs will be unaffordable if the client leaves the system.

- Designating many single parents and temporarily ill or clients with disabilities as "unemployable" may create a psychological barrier to their planning and preparing for eventual employment.
- Inconsistency in the provision of employment support services, and a lack of sufficient staff resources allocated to this task, means that many clients are not receiving all the help they need to find and maintain employment.
- The earnings exemption policy provides more of an incentive for part time rather than full time employment, and clients are not always aware of the exemption or how it works.
- Clients are told that they are expected to seek work, but there is very little monitoring of their efforts and clients are rarely penalized if they fail to follow through.
- Clients classified as "employable" are sometimes caught in a cycle, alternating between short term employment and returning to the program.
- The difference between Social Allowance benefits and wage income for entry level jobs is, for some clients, not enough to provide an incentive to leave the program. And, the availability of some benefits makes welfare an easier choice than finding work to pay for family needs.

This lack of emphasis on employment within the welfare program is unacceptable given the current social and economic environment of our province. There will always be those who cannot ever support themselves or their families, and there must be long term financial assistance available to meet this need. But potentially employable clients must be encouraged to leave the program so that the program, and its resources, may return to its primary focus as a transitional assistance program for those in need. The wasted potential, both in terms of human idleness and provincial economic strength, cannot be allowed to continue and grow as it has under the old program.

This is particularly true of the young single adults who may never form an attachment to the labour force if they do not do so during their early adulthood. These young adults are the parents of tomorrow. If they are not encouraged and helped to become independent through employment, their children may become the next generation of welfare clients. It is also an issue for our single parents and their children, as the negative effects of growing up on welfare are a very real concern. Welfare can never provide enough money to meet all needs, and life on welfare promotes a low expectation of the need or ability to grow into independent and self-sufficient adults.

Benefit Rates

Standard food and shelter benefits have not been substantially increased in several years. Recent increases in rental costs and mortgage interest rates, and an increase in public attention to the issue of food rates and food bank usage, have only served to highlight this concern. There is a need to increase food and shelter benefits to more adequately reflect the current cost of purchasing essential items.

Problems With Equity and Fairness

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Canada Assistance Plan Act created requirements for equity and fairness in government programs for low income Canadians. Both pieces of legislation require that client categories and program benefits be structured in such a way that persons in similar circumstances are treated in a similar fashion. The Social Allowance program does not always meet this requirement. For example, all employables receive lower rates in the first three months on the program than those who are on the program more than three months, although their circumstances may be similar.

Program Administration

There are also problems within the Social Allowance system which make administration difficult. Over the years, the effectiveness of program delivery has declined due to reduced staff resources, increased caseloads, and a series of program changes made to respond on an urgent basis to economic restraint and the changing environment. In particular, the following problems were identified:

- Caseworkers have a generalist role, providing an extensive variety of services to a large caseload of clients. Large caseloads mean that caseworkers have less time or resources to provide all the services a client may need. The focus is almost exclusively one of providing financial benefits, with no time available to help clients increase their employability.
- There is no clear and widely disseminated philosophy and purpose of the Social Allowance program which focuses on client independence and self-sufficiency. Training and supervision of caseworkers, and delivery of the program, tends to emphasize accuracy of benefits determination, reduction of fraud and error, and timely processing so that clients receive, as quickly as possible, all benefits to which they are entitled. While each of these is important, more needs to be done to encourage employment and independence as a goal for most clients.
- The complexity of the program and benefit structure, and the discretionary nature of many benefits has made administration time-consuming, confusing for clients and staff, and has led to inconsistency in client categorization and benefits, and frequent

appeals. Simplification and streamlining of the program benefits, categorization system and administration is required. The introduction of an automated information system was an essential first step in this direction.

- The importance of co-ordination and co-operation with other government departments such as Career Development and Employment is not highlighted enough in the Social Allowance program. To become self-reliant, many clients need better access to programs outside of Family and Social Services.

No program can, on its own, change the social and economic realities that will continue to force many Albertans to turn to government support at some time in their lives. But the income support program of the future must ensure that everything possible is done to return these individuals and their families to independence as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Income Support Developments in Canada and the United States

Welfare reform in American and Canadian jurisdictions has increasingly focused on independence through employment and training. These experiments indicate that an emphasis on employment services reduces welfare caseloads and costs over the long term. In the United States in particular, this approach was shown to be far more significant than attempts to reduce welfare dependency by tightening eligibility and restricting and reducing benefits.

In Canada, the Employability Enhancement Agreements, signed by the provinces, territories and federal government, helped establish new employment and training initiatives in the provinces and territories. Alberta signed an Agreement in 1987, and this led to the establishment of the Employment Alternatives Program which is provided in co-operation with Alberta Career Development and Employment. As part of this same agreement, Employment and Immigration Canada began targeting more of their program spaces to Social Allowance clients and, with new funds, expanded the programs available to clients.

Supports For Independence

As a result of the comprehensive review of the Social Allowance program, it became clear that the program was not clearly positioned to meet the future needs of Albertans and their families. The issues identified in the review pointed to the need for a new income support program which provides a better, simpler system focussed on encouraging the greatest degree of independence possible. *Supports For Independence* is that new program.

What is *Supports For Independence*? It is a program that provides solid supports to clients — assured financial support for those who are unable or unavailable to enter the workforce, and additional employment and training assistance for clients who are able to work.

Supports For Independence addresses the problems of Alberta's old income support program, and introduces a new approach to meeting the needs of low income families. By investing in helping clients obtain skills training and employment, government can help clients help themselves and their families to gain long term personal economic security.

Whenever possible, clients will be expected to become part of the labour force. If necessary, they will be helped to develop marketable job skills. No matter the starting level of clients, the objective will always be the same — to help them bridge the gap between dependence on income support and long term self-sufficiency through employment. Independence is the goal, and *Supports For Independence* is the tool that will make that transition possible.

While clients benefit the most from the new program, staff will also benefit from streamlined administration and lower caseloads over time. In addition, the public benefits from a more effective income support program which targets limited funds more efficiently.

How Clients Access the New Program

Under *Supports For Independence*, clients are first evaluated on the basis of need, through income, asset and needs testing. Once financial eligibility has been established, clients are then assessed on the basis of their current and potential status with respect to the labour market. This will determine what activities, if any, need to be undertaken while a client is receiving financial benefits.

Supports For Independence replaces the old "employable" and "unemployable" designations with four programs which provide different supports to different groups of clients. There are three key questions which help determine which of the four programs applies:

First, "Is the client working or in school?"

If no, "Is the client **able** to work?"

If yes, "Is the client **available** for work?"

Based on the answers to these questions, clients are then classified under one of the following programs:

Employment and Training Support Program

If clients are **able** and **available** to work or go to school, or if they are already participating in training or education programs, then they will receive assistance through Employment and Training Support. This will include people receiving temporary benefits while awaiting their unemployment insurance. More than one-third of all *Supports For Independence* cases will be helped through this program.

Although clients will be expected to do as much as they can for themselves, Employment and Client Support Services workers will be available if Employment and Training Support clients need extra help to find a job or access government and agency programs to upgrade skills or acquire work experience. These Employment and Client Support Services positions, one of three new staff roles, will be phased in over the next year. Employment and Training Support clients will be expected to create a plan of action outlining the steps they need to take to become independent and employed. Clients will be responsible for following their own plan, and may have some of their benefits restricted if they fail to follow the path they have chosen to lead them to employment.

Transitional Support Program

If clients are currently **unavailable** for employment or training programs because of temporary health problems, or because they are caring for young children (less than two years old) or other ill or disabled dependents, or because of other temporary reasons such as pregnancy or bereavement, then they will receive help through this program. It is called transitional support because it provides *temporary* help until the client is **available** for work again.

Approximately 20 per cent of individuals and families on *Supports For Independence* will receive assistance through this program. Children who require assistance, and who are living with guardians, will also be helped through this program.

Assured Support Program

If clients are **unable** to work because of permanent disability, persistent mental or physical health problems, or multiple barriers to employment (e.g. a combination of age, low education and skills, poor health), then this program will provide financial support. Clients who are eligible for AISH but whose needs exceed the benefits available under that program (this group is called Social Allowance for the Disabled) will fall under Assured Support; however, those working or in training will be helped under one of the other programs. It is expected that one-quarter of *Supports For Independence* cases will be in Assured Support.

Supplement to Earnings Program

If a client has been on assistance, and then obtains work, in a full or part time capacity, but is not earning enough to support his or her family, then this program will supplement earnings. After income is taken into account, benefits are provided to the level which would be given through *Supports For Independence* if the client was not working. In addition, these clients receive an incentive, in the form of an exempted portion of earnings income, to ensure that they are "better off" working. Those who are receiving assistance and awaiting pay will also be helped through this sub-program. Approximately one in six cases will receive assistance through *Supplement to Earnings*. Almost all of these will be families with children.

Financial Benefits

During the three year implementation period, the current structure of financial benefits will change significantly in an effort to:

- reduce inequity between client groups;
- simplify and streamline benefits;
- reduce the number of individualized benefits;
- control the use of some non-continuous benefits; and
- improve the level of benefits.

Under *Supports For Independence*, clients will have access to a more equitable financial benefit structure, an expanded standard package, and increased food and shelter rates. The standard benefit package will expand on February 1, 1991.

Examples of Changes in Financial Benefits

Example 1

Social Allowance

A client has been in the program for less than three months, and is looking for a job. He is sharing accommodation. He qualifies for $180 in shelter benefits. He also receives $161 in basic allowance which, because he has been on the program less than three months, does not include an allowance for clothing or household supplies. He and his social worker have determined that he has extra needs totalling $49, which covers laundry ($11) and transportation ($38 in Edmonton). So, he receives a total of $390 each month.

Supports For Independence

The client receives the expanded standard benefit package from the date of application. This totals $255 per month to cover food, clothing, household supplies, telephone, laundry, personal needs and transportation. In addition, he receives $215 for his shelter benefit. His would receive a total of $470 each month.

Example 2

Social Allowance

A single parent is staying at home full time to look after her two preschool children. She receives a basic allowance of $445 plus a $17 laundry allowance, $10 telephone allowance (in Calgary), and a shelter allowance of $490. She receives a total of $962 monthly.

Supports For Independence

The client receives a standard benefit package of $543 and a shelter allowance of $510. She would receive a total of $1,053 every month.

Example 3

Social Allowance

A two parent family (children are 6, 8 and 12 years old) need financial assistance. They receive $746 basic allowance, $22 laundry, $10 for telephone, $36 for transportation and $525 for shelter. They receive a total of $1339 every month.

Supports For Independence

The family receives a standard benefit package of $916 , and a shelter allowance of $550, for a total of $1466 every month.

Example 4

Social Allowance

A client is unemployed and living with his parents (who are not on Social Allowance). He receives a room and board rate of $355 every month. He also gets a personal allowance of $21 per month and a transportation allowance of $38 per month. His total monthly benefit is $414.

Supports For Independence

The client receives a standard benefit of $255 plus $64 for shelter, for a total of $319 per month.

The new financial benefit structure will be composed of three major categories of benefit packages.

Standard Benefit Package

All categories of clients will receive the same standard benefit package from the date of application. This package will include:

- a benefit for *Individual Needs*, to cover food, clothing, personal requirements, and transportation, to be provided at a flat rate for each individual in the household. There will be different rates for adults and children. Regular transportation benefits will be provided to adults only;
- a benefit for *Household Needs*, to cover utility costs, household supplies, telephone, laundry, and accommodation expenses, such as rent or a mortgage. This benefit will be provided to the family unit, based on family size and living arrangements; and
- a benefit for *Health Needs* will be provided to cover medical care, prescription drugs, dental, optical costs, etc. These benefits are provided through a medical services card rather than as a cash benefit.

Clients will have an increased responsibility for budgeting and financial planning, and will have the freedom to use their standard benefits package as they see fit based on their personal or family priorities. As the standard benefit package is expanded, controls will be put in place to restrict access to some irregular benefits. As clothing will now be provided to all clients from the date of application, the "clothing to standard" benefit will be eliminated. Clothing to cover emergency, work and maternity needs will still be available on a case-by-case basis.

Participation Benefit Package

These will be provided to clients who are working or attending school, to cover the additional costs associated with regular participation in the workforce or training programs, including extra costs resulting from an increased need for transportation, day care, etc. Unlike the Social Allowance program, *Supports For Independence* will now cover the day care surcharge if required. This was previously only paid upon the direction of an Appeal Panel.

Participation benefits will be phased in over time, in conjunction with changes to the "earnings exemption" policy which ensures that benefits are not deducted dollar-for-dollar from employment income. The policy will be changed to make it simpler to understand and to ensure it provides an incentive to move to full time work.

In addition, and of specific concern to single parents, clients who would normally leave the program upon obtaining employment may become eligible for a new benefit to cover transitional health costs

such as prescription drugs. Full details of this new benefit are not yet available, but the special coverage will be time limited following client departure from the program. It is intended to provide an additional support and incentive for gaining employment. Clients leaving the program will also be informed of the Alberta Health Care premium waiver and subsidized premium options, but will be responsible for obtaining this themselves.

Supplementary Benefits Package

Continuous (monthly) **benefits** will cover clearly defined and demonstrated individualized needs of clients. This will include items such as special diet, as well as any other unique items not already covered through the standard benefits.

Non-continuous (one-time) benefits will not be as widely available as was the case under Social Allowance. Under *Supports For Independence,* it is expected that there will be a reduction in the number of requests for non-continuous benefits because of the expanded standard package. There will be new restrictions applied to some non-continuous benefits which clients may have received in the past, such as furniture and appliances. Washers and dryers will generally not be provided, as all clients will receive a monthly laundry allowance. Clothing to standard will not be available, as clothing will now be included in the monthly benefits. The child recreation allowance will be eliminated as an annual benefit and will be included in the child's *individual needs* monthly allowance.

Delivery Model

Supports For Independence features a streamlining of services to clients, and a stronger emphasis on encouraging their transition to independence. To be successful in decreasing caseloads and helping clients become self-sufficient through employment, the new program requires a new delivery model which specializes staff roles to meet the objectives of the program and the needs of clients. The generalist social worker model will be replaced by three specialized roles. Current income support staff will be assigned to one of the three roles outlined below.

When clients apply to the *Supports For Independence* program, an **Intake Worker** will assist them with their application and will determine their eligibility for assistance. Intake workers will decide which program best meets the client's needs, based on an evaluation of the client's current situation and future potential in the labour market. They will assist clients to develop a plan of action to get them started on the road to independence, and will refer clients to appropriate support services available in the community. They will also advise clients of their rights and responsibilities while receiving financial benefits.

The **Financial Benefits Worker** will provide on-going management of the financial benefits established for each client by the intake worker. Financial Benefits workers will be the clients' primary contact, and will adjust benefits monthly as necessary and make changes as client circumstances change. These workers will have full authority to make all ongoing eligibility decisions.

Although clients will be expected to do as much as they can for themselves, **Employment and Client Support Services (E.C.S.S.) Workers** will be available to provide supports which encourage independence through employment. Employment and Client Support Services staff will work with clients who need extra help to develop action plans which are aimed at an eventual move to independence from government financial support. When appropriate, clients will receive referrals to government and community support programs which focus on training, employment and lifeskills enhancement. Some Employment and Client Support services will be available to all client groups, but most staff resources will be targeted to clients receiving assistance under the Employment and Training Support program. This staff function will be phased in by October 1991. In order to provide these expanded services, an additional 55 new staff positions will be allocated to this function in the future.

The goal of the new delivery model is to ensure that a structure is in place which supports the objectives of the *Supports For Independence* program: to provide financial benefits as effectively and efficiently as possible, and to help clients make the transition to independence whenever feasible. The new specialization of staff roles is designed to help meet these goals, but frontline staff are not alone in their efforts. There are several departmental programs which provide complementary assistance in the delivery of effective services to *Supports For Independence* clients.

Child Care Subsidy

The Child Care Subsidy Program was expanded in 1990 to target more of the available government day care funding to lower income Albertans. This expansion included an increase in the maximum subsidy paid per child. Child Care Subsidy staff help clients determine eligibility. If clients are eligible for Child Care Subsidy, a portion of their day care costs will be paid directly to the day care centre or family day home operator. Clients may have the remainder of their day care fees covered through *Supports For Independence* if they are eligible for the participation benefit package.

Family Relations

Single parent clients subrogate the right to apply for or receive maintenance or alimony payments from the person legally responsible for supplying maintenance. Family Relations workers negotiate maintenance agreements with the party responsible. If this should not prove feasible, the worker will make an application to court, on behalf of the Government, for a maintenance order. Once a maintenance order is obtained, the Family Relations worker will register the order with the Maintenance Enforcement Program (MEP), Department of the Attorney General, for collection and enforcement.

Fraud

When there is suspicion of deliberate fraud on the part of a client, Fraud Investigators are responsible for an initial investigation of the case. In cases where fraud is confirmed, the client will be charged under the Criminal Code of Canada.

Eligibility and Benefits Verification (EBV)

A certain number of client files are verified every month to ensure that eligibility and benefit levels are correct. The selection is done on a random basis, and these reviews are conducted by EBV workers.

Additional Policy Changes

Caring For A Child At Home

One parent may now choose to stay at home to care for a child who is less than two years of age. Once the youngest child is two, the parent will be expected to seek and accept employment or enroll in training programs leading to employment. Some single parents who were considered "unemployable" under the Social Allowance program will now be expected to begin planning for employment.

Room Rate When Living With Family

Social Allowance clients who live with their families received a shelter benefit equivalent to commercial room rates. Under *Supports For Independence*, individuals who live with their parents or adult children will only be eligible for a shelter benefit which recognizes the extra cost of a bedroom and additional household costs. The rate will now be the same as the shelter allowance paid for children living with guardians ($64 per month).

Transportation

Social Allowance clients who receive transportation benefits usually receive funding (about $36 per month) which allows them to purchase a bus pass. With basic transportation now provided to all clients as part of the standard benefit package, the rate will be $25 per month in recognition that not all clients will need to use transportation on a daily basis. Those who are employed or in training will have access to extra transportation benefits of $15 per month, as part of the participation benefits, because of their increased requirement for transportation.

Penalties and Restrictions of Benefits

Supports For Independence was developed in recognition that most clients want to achieve self-sufficiency by obtaining long term employment. In addition to covering essential needs, the program provides additional supports for those working toward independence. With that new direction, however, comes an increased expectation of client responsibility in following through on commitments to strive for independence.

Clients are expected to access all resources available to them in order to meet basic needs, including support from their family, and child maintenance or alimony.

Clients are required to provide evidence that they are in true need of financial support and assistance, and must inform staff of any change in personal circumstances which might affect their eligibility for benefits.

Clients are expected to actively seek employment and self-sufficiency. Unless they cannot work due to permanent physical or mental health problems, or they are temporarily unavailable for work, clients are expected to seek employment or take other steps toward independence within a reasonable period of time, depending on individual circumstances.

- If clients are in the ***Assured Support*** or ***Transitional Support*** programs, they are not expected to gain employment until personal circumstances change and they are re-classified under one of the other programs.
- If clients are in the ***Employment and Training Support*** program, they are expected to actively seek and accept employment or enter a training or work experience program related to employment and skills improvement.
- If clients are in the ***Supplement to Earnings*** program, they are expected to maintain employment or try to find a better job that will allow them to become fully self-sufficient.

To set goals, and to ensure that clients who are able to work are aware of their responsibility to try to find employment, clients will be responsible for planning for their future. For those who are unable to develop this plan on their own, assistance may be provided by Employment and Client Support Services staff. The plan will set realistic "goals" in the transition to independence, based on personal circumstances and needs.

Penalties, in the form of restrictions of benefits, will be considered for failure to seek self-sufficiency by finding employment over a reasonable period of time. These will range from restriction of some benefits to removal of benefits. Clients who deliberately, and with intent, provide false or misleading information will be subject to criminal prosecution under the Criminal Code of Canada.

This increased emphasis on personal accountability is an essential component of the new program. *Supports For Independence* provides the resources for achieving independence, but for the program to work effectively, clients must be willing and encouraged to help themselves. If clients consistently fail to meet reasonable goals and obligations, then they will not have access to the same benefits and supports as other Albertans who demonstrate their commitment to self-sufficiency.

Implementation

Over the three year implementation period, significant changes will be required to introduce *Supports For Independence* as the new provincial income support program.

Program Changes

The Social Development Act will be replaced completely. Preparation of a "Financial Benefits and Supports For Independence Act" is currently underway, and the new Act will be introduced in the legislature in the fall of 1991 or spring of 1992.

Following the announcement of *Supports For Independence*, the following changes will be introduced on or before February 1, 1991:

- implementation of the new delivery model commences
- increases in the food rate for all client groups
- increase in the overall shelter ceilings; clients who are living with immediate family will have a decreased shelter ceiling
- clothing and household benefits added to the standard benefit package at intake
- telephone, basic transportation and laundry benefits provided to all client groups as part of the standard benefit package

- elimination of differing shelter ceilings for short term and long term single employables
- implementation of new policy allowing parent to be considered as unavailable for work if caring for a young child less than two years old
- payment of the day care surcharge allowed if required
- expansion of fraud and family relations function
- restriction of benefit availability for furniture and appliances
- clothing to standard restricted for all client groups
- elimination of the annual child's recreation allowance; introduction of monthly allowance for each child's personal and recreational needs, as part of the standard benefit package for each child

Between April 1991 and March 1992, the following changes are scheduled to be introduced:

- classification of clients into new programs
- implementation of new staff workload standards
- implementation of caseload reporting under new programs
- introduction of transitional health benefits for clients leaving *Supports For Independence* for employment
- adjustment of medical benefits package for clients, to ensure equity and consistency with new program direction
- review of participation benefits and changes to the earnings exemption policy
- review of policy regarding earned income

Between April 1992 and March of 1993, the following changes are scheduled to be introduced:

- food, clothing, personal and transportation benefits combined to become a flat rate benefit paid according to age
- introduction of the new *Financial Benefits and Supports For Independence Act*
- full introduction of the household benefit based on family composition and living arrangement
- proclamation of new Act and repeal of Social Development Act

Communications

Program implementation will be supplemented with a communications component so that staff are fully supported in their efforts to communicate changes to clients and the public.

1. Staff Briefings

In addition to a special one-day meeting to introduce the new program to frontline management and supervisory staff, regional information sessions will be conducted by senior department staff in order to answer questions and obtain staff input. Throughout the implementation process, staff will be encouraged to provide their feedback through a special PROFS line (sd931046), writing to the Executive Director, or through discussions with their managers. A staff newsletter called "In Support" will provide ongoing updates on changes, and feedback on staff questions.

This is the most important income support initiative to be introduced in twenty years, and ongoing staff evaluation and input is essential to the success of the program. A full Income Support staff conference is planned for the spring of 1991 to provide an opportunity to discuss the new program and its impact.

2. Public and Client Information

Public communications efforts include a province-wide information and marketing campaign which features print brochures and other materials.

The brochures include the following:

Supports For Independence...
an introduction to Alberta's new income support program
(general public)

Supports For Independence...
your new income support program
(Social Allowance clients)

Straight Talk...
Questions and Answers about Supports For Independence
(current and new clients)

A Shared Responsibility
(an outline of rights and responsibilities for current and new clients)

Working Towards Independence...
A Helpful Guide to Planning Your Future
(employment oriented resource kit for current and new clients)

Current Social Allowance clients will receive the introductory brochure by mail shortly after the announcement of *Supports For Independence*. All other brochures will be available to both clients and the public through district offices and by calling the toll free distribution line at 1-800-662-9691.

Client Issues

Throughout the implementation period, clients will be responding to a series of changes which will be introduced in stages. Clients will always receive advance notification of any changes which affect them. By the end of the implementation period the expected impact on clients will generally be as follows:

All Clients

- Increased food and shelter benefits
- Increased opportunities and incentives for training and employment
- Expanded standard benefit package
- Access to participation benefits if client gains employment
- Decreased access to non-continuous benefits as standard benefits increase
- Stronger penalties and disincentives for any unnecessarily prolonged dependence on government financial support

One- and Two- Parent Families With Children

- Increased basic benefits, especially for young children
- Program recognizes that child-bearing/raising role may mean a period of absence from the labour force
- Two years instead of four months child age limit for a parent's absence from labour force (and easier access to child care options, due to significant expansion of Child Care Subsidy Program)
- Increased income for those in employment or training, through participation support and incentives
- Extension of benefits to cover day care surcharges
- Increased services to assist with independence planning
- Better access to training opportunities
- Access to transitional health benefits for a period of time after leaving the program for employment

Individuals (Singles) and Couples Without Children

- Elimination of difference between standard benefit rates for employable individuals (no short term and long term categories)
- Overall increase in basic benefits for short term employable individuals
- Increased assistance through Employment and Training Support
- Continued restricted access to most non-continuous benefits such as damage deposits and moving expenses
- Increased penalties and disincentives for not following personal plan of action

A Shared Responsibility

The future of Alberta's income support program has just been introduced. With *Supports For Independence*, we have a dynamic new program that promotes personal responsibility and initiative in the pursuit of self-sufficiency. Compassionate support is always there when needed, but financial aid alone is not enough. Within three years, we will have a more effective way to provide financial support, and additional tools and resources to help more people help themselves to independence.

The scope of change to come demands an on-going partnership between policy makers, frontline staff, and clients. For *Supports For Independence* to work effectively, all available resources must be used to the benefit of clients. In return, clients will be responsible for demonstrating a commitment to achieving the highest possible degree of self-sufficiency. The responsibility of staff, and others who work with clients, lies not only in service delivery but also in providing feedback to policy makers, so that information is constantly being shared throughout the province. With a well-balanced and coordinated effort, *Supports For Independence* will continue to provide services and supports which meet the needs of Albertans and their families — well into the 21st century.